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ABSTRACT

Newcomers learn about the practices and values of an organization through a process called socialization. Organizational socialization research provides useful information on the strategies, such as indirect questioning and disguised conversation, that new employees can use as they move into unfamiliar settings. At one time, researchers believed that socialization was a passive process but recent work suggests that it is a process that the newcomer is involved with actively. In addition to asking questions, he or she can test the limits by intentionally deviating from accepted behavior, seeking out written materials such as manuals, questioning peers or third parties, and directing casual conversation toward particular topics. At a time when there is a great deal of movement and uncertainty within industry, an awareness of socialization strategies and resources can be critically important in helping technical communicators make the transition to new assignments, divisions, or organizations. While some may see this process as a positive one, others may consider it indoctrination and question whether it crosses the line ethically. More research is needed to investigate this and other questions. (TB)

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Learning Discourse Conventions: The Socialization of Technical Writers

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Presented at the 42nd Annual Conference of the Society for Technical Communication

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Abstract: Newcomers learn about the practices and values of an organization through a process called socialization. Organizational socialization research provides useful information on the strategies, such as indirect questioning and disguised conversation, that new employees can use as they move into unfamiliar settings and the resources, such as peers and written materials, that are available to these newcomers within organizations. At a time when there is a great deal of movement and uncertainty within industry, an awareness of socialization strategies and resources can be critically important in helping technical communicators make the transition to new assignments, divisions, or organizations.

SOCIALIZATION OF TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS

Regardless of your previous experience as a technical communicator, the first few weeks and months at a new job are filled with situations where you're not sure what to do. There are so many things to learn, such as how to operate the computer system, who to call when you have questions, what format to use for different documents, and how to respond to editors and reviewers. The process of adapting to your new job and new organization is called *socialization*. If you've changed jobs several times, you've probably developed a series of socialization strategies for fitting in quickly. Furthermore, you may have noticed that organizations and supervisors provide resources to help socialize newcomers. However, you may never have thought to articulate those strategies and resources for the benefit of other newcomers.

At a time when there is a great deal of movement and uncertainty within industry, an awareness of socialization strategies and resources become critically important in helping technical communicators who are asked to take on additional tasks, who are transferred to different divisions within their organizations, or who find themselves moving to new organizations. This paper will present a description of effective resources and strategies that arise from research in the area of organizational socialization.

Organizational Socialization

Theories of organizational socialization, which derive from research in both organizational communication and organizational psychology, are concerned with the ways in which newcomers become accepted members of work groups and organizations. Researchers have looked at many different aspects of the socialization process, including (1) the resources that organizations provide to facilitate socialization, (2) the role of supervisors and peers as socializing agents, and (3) the strategies that many newcomers use to learn about the values and practices of the organization. A brief review of the findings in these areas can suggest

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ways to efficiently socialize technical communicators to the discourse conventions of organizations.

Resources. Many companies provide some type of orientation for new employees, but often that orientation consists of an overload of information thrust on the confused newcomer by personnel who may not be part of the individual's specific work group. While there is limited research on the effectiveness of specific orientation programs, some evidence exists in support of the following statements:

· Written communication, such as company handbooks or manuals, is more effective than oral communication for providing information about company policies, rules, and benefits. (1) By extension, we can suggest that styleguides and procedural manuals are effective tools for newcomers.
· Formal orientation programs are often overwhelming to newcomers; the stress caused by these programs can be lessened by informal, conversational discussions of company practices. (1) If your organization provides formal orientation, you may want to consider following it with a casual discussion of goals and values of the workgroup. If you are the newcomer, you may want to ask to meet with your supervisor following orientation to clarify your role and the company's expectations.
· A consistent, strong, orientation program may strengthen the organizational culture, which may, in turn, add to the durability of the organization. (2, 3) If your organization doesn't provide orientation for newcomers, you may want to create a program within your own work unit.
· Training provided within the workgroup *may be* more effective than training provided by a third party. (3) Many organizations hire outside consultants to provide on-going training. Since the evidence is not clear, you may want to devise an assessment program to determine the value of all training given to employees.
· Mentors provide an excellent avenue for the transfer of information on many aspects of organization life. (1, 3, 4) Encourage the development of mentoring relationships through a formal mentoring program or by providing opportunities for newcomers to work collaboratively with more experienced employees.

Supervisors and Peers. Most researchers in the area of organizational socialization agree that colleagues—both supervisors and peers—are essential agents of effective socialization. Newcomers are constantly being confronted with situations that they don't fully understand, and they need help from more experienced individuals to make sense of what they are facing.

Supervisors are crucial in relaying information about the specifics of assigned tasks, describing interpersonal and organizational expectations and goals, and providing feedback on performance. (1) If the newcomer sees the supervisor as a credible source of information, the supervisor may be adopted as a model. However, supervisors may be seen as providing an official view, so newcomers often turn to peers for information on "the way things really are." (5)

Peers are often more accessible than supervisors, which increases the likelihood that a newcomer with a question will go to a peer for help. In addition, a newcomer may feel more comfortable admitting "ignorance" to a peer than to a supervisor. In one of the few empirical studies the relationships between newcomers and their peers, Debra Comer concludes that peers are able to help new employees learn

· factual information about how to do their assigned tasks,
· procedural information that pertains to the workgroup, and
· social information, such as norms and values, within the workgroup and the organization.

This learning is facilitated when there are strong work-based interactions between the newcomer and the peer. (6) Collaborative projects, small group meetings, and spontaneous social activities can provide opportunities for newcomers to build relationships with peers and ease their transition into the workgroup.

Newcomer strategies. For many years, socialization was seen as a passive process that newcomers experienced: it was something that organizations "did" to new employees. However, over the past decade there has been an increasing interest in the active participation of newcomers in their socialization to the organization's values, norms, behaviors, and goals. Research suggests that there are specific strategies that individuals can consciously use to ease their transition into a new situation. For example, the newcomer can:

· ask direct questions of other individuals in the workgroup (particularly useful for gaining technical or factual information);
· indirectly question a colleague about a sensitive issue;
· ask a question of a third party, often a peer in another workgroup;
· test the limits by intentionally deviating from accepted behavior;
· direct casual conversation toward a specific topic; and
· pay close attention to the actions of others in the workgroup. (5)

Another strategy involves seeking out other newcomers to compare notes, ask questions, and share new experiences (3). This strategy is seen by some, however, as useful primarily for lessening stress and providing support since other newcomers may not be credible sources of information. (5)

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

While the application of socialization theory to technical communication is both logical and valid, there has been very little actual research on how writers learn the discourse conventions of organizations. More specifically, there are two factors that are crucially important to technical communication have been overlooked or given minimal emphasis in the more general study of organizational socialization:

· The role of written materials. Documents are a both tool and product for technical communicators, and their design and use is one of our primary concerns.
· The ethics of socialization itself. Technical communicators are bound by the STC code of ethics, requiring that we maintain and demand standards of ethical behavior.

Thus, these are issues that need to be examined, discussed, and considered as we look for effective means to assist newcomers in learning how to write appropriately in specific organizational settings. The following sections raise questions about these issues and are intended to encourage conversation rather than provide answers.

The Role of Written Materials

Studies of the socialization of newcomers in organizations have paid scant attention to the use of written materials as socialization tools. However, written materials would seem to be particularly important in the socialization of technical communicators. There are two categories of written materials—manuals and models—that deserve investigation.

Manuals. While, as mentioned above, there is some evidence that company manuals or handbooks are useful in the socialization of newcomers, we do not really know how newcomers use these materials. As technical communicators, we know that to write an effective document we need information not only on the organization's purpose for producing the document, but also on the reader's purpose in reading it. We need to think about how newcomers use styleguides and other procedural manuals: Are they looking for help with format? Content? Voice? Can they get information about audience? Testing? Review procedures? Will they use a reference book for questions about software? Hardware? Networks? When will they turn to a document and when would they prefer to ask a colleague? When is it *appropriate* for them to choose a colleague over a document? What is the role of on-line help systems for the socialization of newcomers to the conventions of the organization?

Models. Models are written documents that are examples of accepted and appropriate format, style, content, and/or tone. Newcomers are frequently given models to help them meet the expectations of the organization; even more experienced writers frequently refer to previously written documents for assistance in creating new documents. However, we don't really know how individuals use models. Are they reading doe content or looking at the layout? Are they asking questions about choices made by the previous writer or merely mimicking something that was successful? Can models help if the audience is different? How much and what type of information is transferable from one document to another? Does the use of models stifle creativity? Is there room for creativity? Would a collection of models be more effective than single examples? Would annotated models, highlighting important features, be more effective than clean copies?

Socialization or Indoctrination?

A 1984 *Fortune* article succinctly summed up socialization when it said:

The aim of socialization is to establish a base of shared attitudes, habits, and values that foster cooperation, integrity, and communication. (2)

However, many people see socialization as indoctrination: buy into the values of this organization or you won't work here. Looking at this in technical communication terms, if we insist on standardized formats for documents, are we crossing an ethical boundary? The STC "Code for Communicators" places a high value on ethical behavior and specifically counsels each technical communicator to "hold myself responsible for how well my audience understands my message." What do we do when the message doesn't work in existing formats? Is there a way to incorporate flexibility into the value system of organization? How do we allow for flexibility and not create chaos? How are professional technical communicators resolving the ethical issue of enforced conformity?

Looking for Answers

Further research can suggest answers to the questions raised here, but it is only in the workplace that the answers find their real value. I am currently engaged in a research project that is investigating how newcomers in a variety of professions are learning the discourse conventions of their organizations. The goal of this research is a better understanding of how writers are socialized to discourse conventions, and I hope that one day this information will help facilitate the entry of newcomers in organizations. However, professionals in the field of technical communication can also look for ways to help newcomers. By viewing your own work environment with an awareness of socialization processes and the questions raised here, you may
discover ways to create or improve orientation and training for others, enhance the efficiency of your work unit, and provide yourself with resources to ease future career moves.

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